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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 005723

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/30/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT SEZER TO PARLIAMENT: SECULARISM IS BASIS
OF TURKEY'S DEMOCRACY

Classified By: CDA Nancy McElDowney for reasons 1.4(b), (d)

11. (C) Summary. Turkey's President stressed secularism and democracy as antidotes to increasing fundamentalism in his October 1 speech at parliament's official opening. Coming as it did on the day before PM Erdogan's meeting with President Bush in Washington and a much anticipated address on October 2 by Chief of Defense General Buyukanit (septel), President Sezer's speech contained no surprises but a few clear jabs at religious extremism and the Islamist ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). He interspersed frequent references to Ataturk's legacy of a secular democratic Turkey, constitutional and judicial integrity, and separation of powers with calls for transparency, responsible free press, and continued modernization. Sezer acknowledged some recent "developments" on the PKK but reiterated Turkey's right of self defense and charged that Turkey is not getting enough support for its terrorism fight. Results from cooperation on terrorism and northern Iraq will be a litmus test for Turkish-US relations, he said. More lawyerly discourse than impassioned speech, Sezer's message included the veiled warning that Turkey's balance of power is at risk if PM Erdogan's AKP moves into the presidency in May. End summary.

12. (C) In his last speech to parliament before leaving office next spring, President Sezer focused on secularism and modernization and warned against the misuse of religion in politics. Echoing several recent muscular speeches by Turkish military officials, Sezer raised increasing fundamentalism in Turkey as a dangerous internal threat -- a threat PM Erdogan had dismissed as overstated in September 30 comments to the press. Sezer charged that the "reactionary threat" has remained intent on changing the basic characteristics of the state. Sezer touted the military's dedication to preserving Turkey's secular system and defended the military's right to comment on nationalism and secularism. The armed forces should be strengthened as a guarantee of Turkey's democratic existence, he stated. His comments contrasted with PM Erdogan's veiled advice to Gen. Buyukanit before departing for the US (which Erdogan later revealed to the press) to stop focusing on fundamentalism and refrain from statements that might cause tensio in Turkey and harm the economy.

13. (U) A ormer head of the Constitutional Court, Sezerreferenced constitutional provisions that enshrine separation of powers, judicial integrity and the overarching priority of secularism. Some freedoms, including a free press, can be limited in the interest of protecting the state, Sezer declared. Others -- territorial integrity, nationalism, multiculturalism under a single flag and language -- are sacrosanct and cannot be infringed. While a free press will have a pioneering role in protecting a free society, Sezer added that professional ethics must be followed and the media must be protected against misuse for commercial interests.

14. (U) Secularism is Turkey's path to modernization, Sezer stated, and modernization must be Turkey's goal. He flagged Turkey's rapid population growth as a risk to social and cultural development and called for a coordinated family planning program. A modern economy that learns from the past as it looks to the future will help combat poverty and equalize regional development, he added. Where the private sector is not keen to invest, the state must make up the difference. He stressed the need for transparency and urged the judicial, executive and legislative branches to join forces in the fight against rampant corruption. He called for compulsory education to be increased to 12 years, noting that information is the key to sustainability of development. In a swipe at religious schools, Sezer stated that dogmas should be eliminated from Turkey's education system.

15. (U) Addressing foreign policy issues, Sezer said Turkey's influence in international affairs is growing. Given the many threats in Turkey's neighborhood, the nation's security

depends on regional and global cooperation. These conditions increase the importance of Turkish-US relations, which rest of mutual friendship and trust. The outcome of cooperation on terrorism and northern Iraq will be a litmus test for the relationship that will be closely watched by Turkish public opinion, he noted. While Turkey is doing its part in the war on terrorism, is not getting enough support in return to

ANKARA 00005723 002 OF 002

fight its own terrorist threat, Sezer charged. Turkey will do what it needs to within the law to defend itself. He acknowledged that Turkey needs to eliminate the economic problems in the southeast and noted obliquely recent "developments" that hold the promise for progress.

16. (U) Sezer touched on several regional hotspots. He urged Iran to counter the lack of trust by increasing transparency with international organizations, adding that Turkey is following developments regarding its nuclear program with concern. The conflicts in Iraq, Georgia and Azerbaijan should be solved by preserving territorial integrity and political unity. Labeling the Palestinian problem the key to stability in the Middle East, Sezer said the Turkey can contribute to building peace and economic cooperation in the region. Eu stressed that EU membership must remain a goal because it is in Turkey's and the EU's interest, and said it is the EU's duty to craft a solution to the Cyprus standoff that is politically equitable.

17. (C) Comment. While PM Erdogan is clearly trying to tamp down talk of increasing extremism in Turkey, Sezer's speech, along with recent military comments, keep the focus on AKP's Islamist underpinnings rather than the stable government AKP has managed to provide since 2002. President Sezer's speech packed no real surprises; it set the stage for PM Erdogan's meeting with President Bush and General Buyukanit's speech by reminding parliament and the public that secularism and democracy are the basis for Turkey's continued modernization.

It also delivered a warning that Turkey's constitutional balance of power is at risk if PM Erdogan's AKP takes the presidency when he leaves office in May. By joining the military's chorus on the increasing threat of fundamentalism, Sezer is feeding into conspiracy theories that the AKP's "true" agenda is to turn Turkey into an Islamist state, with control of the presidency the final step. These dire warnings may resonate with some, and are bound to escalate in the election fray. But the majority of Turks continue to define themselves and the country by Ataturk's principles of secularism, democracy and modernization, even as they support AKP's agenda for greater freedom of religious expression as part of this society's struggle to craft a coherent answer to the question of what it means to be Turkish and Muslim in today's world. We expect Gen. Buyukanit will echo Sezer's message later today in a speech that will likely also emphasize the military's role in maintaining stability as Turkey wrestles with the conflicts that modernization brings.

End comment.

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